SPECIAL SECTION: POSTGRADUATE PAPERS ON AFRICA

China’s Foreign Policy towards Africa: An eclectic-theoretical explanation

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Introduction

This paper adopts an eclectic approach to ascertain the theory that best describes China’s foreign policy towards Africa. It discusses and attempts to theorise Sino-Africa engagement on three levels – political, economic and security - from the founding of the PRC in 1949 until 2013, when Xi Jinping assumed office as president. It is difficult to apply a single theory/paradigm to explain China’s foreign policy towards Africa, nor can it be examined by pitting theories against each other. As Lanteigne (2020a, p. 20) has intimated, “the process of foreign policymaking in China is still very opaque compared to that of Western states and it is often difficult for outside observers to determine how particular decisions are made”. Indeed, Waltz (1996) admits that foreign policy is a complex subject that almost defies any theoretical explanation. According to him, scholars would have to be content with analytical accounts, the factors of which will vary on a case-by-case basis. The paper argues that the eclectic approach allows flexibility in combining different theories/paradigms to explain the different trajectories of Sino-Africa engagement. I employ Constructivism to explain China’s political engagement with Africa, Liberalism to understand its economic activities on the continent and neoclassical realism to explain its rising security interests on the continent.

An eclectic approach

It is not out of place for scholars of International Relations (IR) to attempt to combine different theories/paradigms to explain phenomena
in the discipline. Indeed, “the pluralities of explanations possible for phenomena have attracted much attention in IR” (Cornut 2015, 1). Some scholars have argued for the utility of combining different theoretical explanations to produce more comprehensive analyses. The quest for an eclectic or problem-driven pragmatism led Sil and Katzenstein (2011) to coin the term ‘analytic eclecticism’ which enjoins scholars to abandon paradigmatism and conduct pluri-theoretical analyses and adopt a complexity-sensitive research agenda in the process. Cornut (2015) argues that the pragmatic, problem-driven and complexity-sensitive research agendas are a stronger foundation than currently predominant conceptualisations. Essentially, an eclectic approach uses different theories to analyse substantive problems. The value of this research design derives from its giving a place to researchers using a plurality of theories. It demonstrates that problem-driven pragmatism is interesting, coherent, and most importantly, possible. This approach legitimises research that contravenes and transcends paradigmatic lines, allowing for eclectic analyses using theoretical frameworks from different parts of the epistemological spectrum (Cornut, 2015). Sil and Katzenstein therefore apply this logic to IR and consider realist, liberal, and constructivist approaches as potentially complementary in understanding specific phenomena (Sil & Katzenstein, 2011). They defend their approach by arguing that “these are the most prevalent approaches in the United States and worldwide” (Sil & Katzenstein, 2011, p. 36). In line with their argument, this paper adopts an eclectic approach to examine China’s foreign policy towards Africa by combining arguments from some major IR theories mentioned above to understand China’s political, economic and security engagements with Africa. From an eclectic perspective, I argue that China’s foreign policy towards Africa could be explained on three main levels – (i) political: explains the political ties the PRC has had with African states since its founding in 1949; (ii) economic: focuses on how business interests and the need to sustain China’s growing economy underpinned by its modernisation drive in the 1970s, shape aspects of its foreign relations with Africa; and (iii) security: attempts to analyse Beijing’s increasing security disposition in its relations with contemporary Africa. This categorisation is important not only because it helps to explain Chinese foreign policy towards Africa, but also because each Chinese leader from 1949 until now, has endeavoured to place a distinct stamp on Chinese foreign policy (Lanteigne, 2020a).

Political engagement
The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) government that ousted the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT, or the nationalists) regime in China
was concerned with consolidating its power not only within China, but on the international scene as well. The quest by the PRC to construct a common Sino-African identity was ostensibly underpinned by a need to promote its political interests and to cement its status in the international system. I propose Constructivism as the suitable IR theory that explains China’s political engagement with Africa. Constructivism broadly has to do with how people make sense of their experiences and observations as well as how shared context of meaning influence the way people act and interact with one another. It combines several notions including culture, history, identity, ideas (ideology), norms, values and interests as key elements to explain the interaction of states with one another. In addition to this, constructivists argue that interests, ideas and norms are ‘socially constructed’, have evolved over time and are further shaped by socialisation within the international environment. Constructivists contend that the international system is not an objective phenomenon like a solar system that is ‘out there’ (Jackson & Sorensen, 2007). Rather, the international system functions only as an intellectual and ideational phenomenon of human creation that could change depending on social interactions. For constructivists, the major element that influences international relations is social consciousness as opposed to material or physical capabilities. Although the term was coined by Nicholas Onuf (1989), Alexander Wendt is considered to have provided an adequate conceptualisation of the theory. His conception of social theory posits that ‘anarchy is what states make of it’. As opposed to realist’s arguments, social theorists argue that the notion of an anarchical international system is a conception, and that states could still cooperate and build good relations. States are primarily responsible to figure out whether or not, other states would be treated or considered as friends or otherwise. Proponents of this theory suggests that political elites prefer the use of diplomacy and other peaceful means to make the international environment safer while they work to present their states as benign in the international system at the same time. I argue that China’s external relations with African states Mao Zedong were shaped by notions of Constructivism. Subsequent Chinese leaders have followed this rhetoric in their political engagements with Africa.

Ideologically, the Mao administration referred to the independent struggles of many African colonies (states) as “national liberation movements” to garner support from its domestic citizens, and also identify with its African counterparts at the same time. This ideology was meant to promote China’s political agenda and to win political allies for Beijing from ‘emerging’ independent African states. This ideology
was largely informed by the structure of the international system after WWII, during the Cold War and China’s own domestic conditions. In addition to the political ideology, Sino-Africa engagement has been influenced by values and construction of common identities over the years. Chinese leaders created a rhetorical schema around these values and common identities. For instance, PRC leaders held a view that both China and Africa were of the same club. The composition, meaning and identity of this club have evolved over several decades and was termed the “Third World and the South” in the 1950s and 1960s (Snow, 1994). An ‘identity’ that informed China’s support of the ‘Nonalignment Movement’ (NAM) that evolved during the Cold War with many African countries as members of this association.

History also plays a key role in China-Africa relations. Snow (1994) argues that both China and Africa faced common enemies, share a common historical perspective, and were subjected to the horrors of European colonial powers. Xingfeng (2017) traces China-Africa relations to 1405 when the Ming Dynasty sent one of its commended Generals (Zheng He) to undertake a mission around the ‘Arabian countries’, west of China whose entourage landed on the African littoral in one such voyage. According to Chinese mythology however, the earliest known interaction between China and Africa occurred around the 2nd century through indirect contact of the silk trade. These historical experiences creates a sense of identity between the two parties. Most Chinese leaders try to foment friendly relations by making reference to this common history between both China and Africa. As a result, many African countries generally accept China’s contemporary foreign policy owing to the historical link between them. Referring to these historical engagements between China and Africa, Xingfeng (2017) explains that China’s recent engagements with Africa is a renewal of an ‘old time’ friendship which was disrupted by Western powers during the slave trade and colonisation of Africa.

Following Joseph Nye, some constructivists understand China’s positive image and friendliness towards Africa in terms soft power. According to his commanding explanation, soft power is ‘the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments’ (Nye, 1990). Unlike hard power, soft power derives from the attractiveness of a country’s culture, political ideals and policies, system of governance, development model, diplomatic style and other elements that present a positive image of a country. Shambaugh (2015) has indicated that the Chinese government attaches so much importance and approaches public diplomacy (an aspect of soft power) the same way
it constructs high-speed rail or builds infrastructure by investing huge sums of money with an expectation to see development. This provides very practical and useful explanation as to why Beijing has invested so much towards the promotion of a positive image in its engagement with Africa. Particularly, the establishment of Confucius Institute (CI) to promote China’s international image through educational and cultural activities is a vivid example of this development. Between 2004 and 2018, 525 CIs were established in 142 countries (Hanban, 2018). By June 2019, China had established 59 Confucius Institutes and 41 Confucius Classrooms in 44 African countries, creating a convenient avenue for African students to learn Chinese language. Importantly, Ford (2015) has indicated that the restoration of China’s global status is not only linked to its material achievements, but also on its cultural appeal, which could gain universal recognition. Further to this, Callahan (2008) has argued that Chinese concept of ‘Tianxia’ (all under heaven) has become popular in the twenty-first century as an ideal to promote peaceful co-existence. He contends that Tianxia will lead to a new hegemony rather than a post-hegemonic order that reproduces China’s hierarchical empire for the twenty-first century. Chinese foreign policy towards Africa has been guided by this principle, sometimes implicit, to achieve a peaceful co-existence and friendliness on the continent.

Konings (2007) has argued that the governing and ruling elites in Africa see new opportunities with Chinese trade and investment, and ways to bolster regime stability and strategically important partnerships. He asserts that what is particularly attractive for many African rulers is the alternative development paradigm propagated by China: non-interference in state sovereignty, freedom from western hegemony, and an absence of any conditions in giving aid (except the ‘one-China’ principle). In recent times, Power et al., (2012) have suggested that China considers its engagement with African countries as one of strategic opportunities and attempts to discard the negative reportage by some critics. Alden and Large (2015) have also intimated that African elites have embraced China’s growing role in international affairs more than other regions of the world, first as a counter-balance to the West and more recently as a development model to be emulated. This highlights the significance of values and rising Chinese political appeal in contemporary Sino-African relations.

Mingjiang (2008) avers that China’s understanding and application of ‘soft power’ goes beyond Nye’s original notion of the concept. He argues that some Chinese scholars and policy analysts have added or sought to extend the concept of ‘soft power’ to include
other elements like Traditional Chinese culture, flexibility in Chinese foreign policy, soft power as a defensive tool to cultivate a better image of Beijing to the outside world as well as the different dimensions of soft power from Chinese perspective – institutional power, identifying power and assimilating power, rather than Nye’s power source-based conceptualisation. China’s foreign policy towards Africa reflects a combination of not only Nye’s conception but features of what Beijing conceives to be soft power. For instance, China’s foreign policy in relation to its activities in Africa have been very flexible with China making references to its own domestic institutions to attract African countries.

**Economic engagement**

The pursuit of strategic economic opportunities guided Chinese external relations with Africa from the late 1970s under Deng Xiaoping, which was aimed at opening the country up to foreign investment and trade. The IR theory that best explains this engagement is Liberalism. Liberalism generally examines the importance of international regimes (institutions and laws), complex interdependence and the role of actors beyond states. It also highlights how states can cooperate in an anarchical international system. The Liberal theory of IR propounded by Andrew Moravcsik suggests that politicians are not independent in formulating foreign policies but are constrained or influenced by the interests of powerful business elites (Moravcsik, 1997). In addition to this, the Liberal theory of international trade posit that states find it efficient to pursue their developmental agenda through economic cooperation rather than the use of force or other violent means. Nye and Keohane’s interdependence theory propose that international trade and cross-country exchange create transnational linkages that have dire consequences if interrupted (Keohane & Nye, 2017). Liberalism generally highlight the fundamental role norms and institutions play in ensuring cooperation between and among states. They maintain that all states are primarily concerned with ensuring the economic growth and well-being of their countries and citizens. I therefore propose Liberalism as the best IR theory to explain China’s economic engagement with Africa.

Yu (2018) avers that apart from political interest, Africa as a whole became an important destination for China’s overseas market, resource supplies and an investment target since Deng Xiaoping launched the market reform in the late 1970s, while trade and investment were important driving factors that shaped China’s policy towards Africa around the same period (Duchâtel, Gowan, & Rapnouil,
Shambaugh (2013) also argues that the Chinese government under Deng Xiaoping privileged foreign trade as an important pillar of its overall development and growth strategy around the 1980s. The Hu Jintao administration pursued a cross-regional diplomacy via a mix of economic and diplomatic initiatives (Lanteigne, 2020b). Cheru and Obi (2011) admit that China’s engagement with Africa is not new, however, ‘it’s going out policy’ from 1998 was closely linked to its domestic socio-economic needs and its global strategic ambitions as a soft power. The need for oil became central to China’s increasing economic growth. As of 2010, China’s consumption of oil was 9.2 million barrels per day, of which 4.8 million was imported from other countries (Shambaugh, 2013). The International Energy Agency has projected that by 2030 China’s demand for oil will rise to 16.6 million barrels per day (bb/d) and its imports will reach 12.5 million per day; about 75 percent of China’s oil will be imported from external sources. Verma (2016) argues that countries like China and India, with small oil reserves relative to their domestic consumption, usually face the risk of energy insecurity. A situation that has prompted an urgent need for China not only to identify oil reserves, but develop the capacity, including an ongoing relationship with oil producing countries (some of which are African countries) to secure the oil supplies.

China’s rapid economic growth, created a need for the country to access commodities and energy, and this need influenced Chinese diplomacy in Africa, Central Asia, and Latin America (Lanteigne, 2020a). Scholars like Power et al., (2012) have averred that China’s engagement with Africa over the last 30 years has moved from ideology to business or from “Maoism to Markets” while Alden et al., (2017) and Yiagadeesens (2010) have also argued that China’s renewed and intensified engagements with African states have been inspired by its need for vital resources. The post-Mao leadership of Deng Xiaoping turned its overall foreign policy into an economic diplomacy essentially because Mao’s era destroyed the Chinese economy, causing severe damage to the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP’s) domestic legitimacy and the state’s international standing. Deng saw Mao’s massive aid to African countries for ideological reasons while the Chinese themselves were tightening their belts as lunatic. This explains the readjustment of foreign policy under Deng Xiaoping.

Security interest
China’s engagement in contemporary Africa is being defined by its increasing role in peace and security issues. I employ neoclassical realists’ arguments to explain China’s rising security-related policies.
towards Africa. “Neoclassical realists share with neorealist and classical realists the view that a country’s foreign policy is primarily formed by its place in the international system and in particular by its relative material capabilities. However, these theorists also argue that the impact of systemic factors on a given country’s foreign policy will be indirect and more complex than neorealist have assumed, since such features can effect policy only through factors on the domestic level” (Rose, 1998:146). For neoclassical realists, it is relative material power that determines the basic parameters within which a state can formulate its foreign policy. Neoclassical realism provides a theoretically-inspired framework which strives to expound the foreign policies of different states facing similar external restraints or the foreign policy of the same state over time. They also recognise that systemic pressures and incentives may guide the general direction of a state’s foreign policy, but that these forces are not so incisive as to determine the intricacies of state behaviour. Meanwhile, Lanteigne (2020a) has argued that the evolving area of neo-classical realism attempts to re-introduce domestic level actors and issues, such as internal Chinese politics, economic issues, government-military relations, and the factions within the CCP, as important variables in understanding the trajectory of Chinese foreign policy. Yu (2018) affirms this position by highlighting that China’s expanding security involvement in Africa is the corollary consequence of China’s strategic objective (sustaining its economic growth) of creating a Sino-African ‘community of common destiny’. Proponents of neoclassical realism state that it incorporates first, second and third image variables. Therefore, I discuss the three image variables to explain China’s rising security interests in Africa. The first image has to do with the role of individuals in determining or shaping the course of a country’s foreign policy. The second image focuses on the fundamental role of states as principal actors, while the third image refers to the ‘anarchical’ international system (environment) within which states operate.

**First image analysis**

Arguably, the current president of China, Xi Jinping, is one of the most influential leaders the PRC has had, and his stated desire to shape and/or re-shape the international system using China’s power and influence aligns with neoclassical analysis at the ‘first image’ or individual level. He is among the first to have signaled China’s new status in the global order. He has also stated and exhibited a desire to shape the international system using China’s power to influence others, and to establish or revise the global rules of engagement. As opposed to his immediate predecessor (Hu Jintao), who avoided promising too much and often referred to
his interest in building China into a “moderately prosperous society”, Xi Jinping began to speak of a “Chinese Dream” (Zhongguo meng), soon after taking office, which not only suggested “a greater degree of confidence in the country’s economic future despite domestic and international challenges, but was also tied to the idea of the “rejuvenation” of China as a great economic power” (Lanteigne, 2020a, p. 12). Indeed, history reveals how some individuals have been very instrumental in influencing the course of events in the international system (Frimpong, 2019). At a meeting with the country’s military and foreign policy elites in November 2014, President Xi outlined his intention to move China from its status as an emerging or regional power to that of a global power (Economy, 2018). In order to achieve this, President Xi began reforms as the head of the Central Military Commission that commands China’s armed forces. These reforms sought to shift the focus and build of the PLA power to naval, air and missile forces, which are vital for his ambitions to enforce territorial claims in Asia and protect China’s increasing economic interests overseas (Page, 2016). The ultimate goal of this reform is to enable the PLA conduct complex joint operations combining air, sea and ground forces with information technology—akin to operations undertaken by the U.S. (ibid). In one of his earlier speeches as President, Mr Xi is reported to have said that one of the reasons for the collapse of the Soviet Union was that its armed forces were under the control of the state, which accounted for its inaction. For him, the Chinese PLA would remain very much the armed forces of the communist party in order to prevent such an occurrence (Yahuda, 2019).

Second image analysis

The second image variable discusses the internal processes and interaction among various actors contribute to shape the foreign policy of countries. There has been a growing number of agencies, groups and organisations that are contributing to Chinese foreign policy making over the last few years. Although there has been a greater concentration of political power in the Chinese government, including in the area of foreign policy, under Xi Jinping, however, the number of actors who contribute to foreign policy making continues to grow both within the Chinese government as well as increasingly outside of it. (Lanteigne, 2020a). This is a development that elucidates the influential role of domestic actors on foreign policy. From the mid-1990s, dense transnational exchanges by NGOs began to also characterise China’s globalising profile. As has been argued above, China’s growing economic capabilities have come with an increase in the country’s security capabilities amidst threats to its citizens and investments in Africa.
Aidoo and Hess (2015) indicated that in Ethiopia, Chinese nationals became proxy targets for the opposition members and rebel movements in order to register their dissatisfaction with the ruling government and Beijing’s association with that government. These incidents, and others, have raised concerns about the ability of the ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to protect its citizens and investments overseas. These developments are generating a growing concern among policy analysts and scholars about the country’s substantial national economic and other interests that are being exposed to serious danger and risk in Africa due to persistent conflicts. Admittedly, the Libyan crisis generated public outcry on the inability of the ruling government to protect its citizens and national interests abroad. China had to evacuate over 34,000 of its nationals faced with a limited capacity to do so. Although the PLA Navy and Air Force were involved in the evacuation (Duchatel, Gowan, & Rapnouil, 2016), China had to rely on foreign powers, principally Greek naval vessels to evacuate its citizens out of Libya (BBC News, 2014 and Xinhua 2011). There were about 75 Chinese businesses operating in Libya’s oil and construction sectors working on some 50 major infrastructure projects. This chaotic situation set off a frantic review of China’s global interests in 2012, not only in Africa, but across the world, as Beijing realised the susceptibility of its firms and citizens to political instability. This generated an urgent need for China to be fully involved in Africa’s peace and security matters.

**Third image analysis**

The third image variable analyses the impact of the international system on a state’s foreign policy. The PRC has risen and/or is rising since its founding to be one of the most powerful countries in the world. There is no doubt today that China is a global power. It is currently the world’s first or second largest economy after the United States depending on the indices one uses to measure – that is whether in nominal or purchasing power parity terms (Economy, 2018). Its nominal GDP was reported at 3,530.3 USD billion in June 2020. Between 2010 and 2015, China contributed 35 percent of global GDP growth (Boyuan, 2016) and 15 percent of global GDP in 2015. China’s foreign direct investment (FDI) globally reached an all-time high of 105.2 billion in 2013. At the systemic or third image level, Beijing has demonstrated its desire to compete and wane the influence/interests of western actors in Africa’s security space. Also, there are ongoing debates that suggest the ‘seeming’ decline of US global power and/or its indifference towards global affairs part of the systemic factors that are influencing China’s security focus across the globe and Africa in particular. The pinnacle
of these debates occurred in 2008 with the global financial crises that caused the American economy to fall into a deep recession. China on the other hand remained unscathed by these events. A situation that made Chinese policy makers and officials to assert that the financial crunch represented an inflection point in world history, albeit, the decline of the United States and the rise of China (Economy, 2018). This seeming shift in the direction of the balance of power in China’s favour was noted at the CCPs Central Work Conference on Foreign Affairs in July 2009 (Yahuda, 2019). Remarkably, Glaser and Dooley (2009) note that the conference called for a radical shift from Deng Xiaoping’s famous maxim for keeping a low profile (Taoguang Yanghui) and called for a more active foreign policy, not to say a more assertive one. In addition to the so-called American decline, Yahuda (2019) argues that Chinese leaders felt that its relative power in the international system had increased substantially. As a result, a famous adviser to Chinese leaders, Wang Jisi, asserted that “many Chinese officials believe that their nation has ascended to be a first-class power in the world and should be treated as such” (cited Ford 2015, 335). Its military spending ranks second only to that of the United States. To further project its military power and standing as a global power, China put up its first foreign military base at Djibouti in 2017. A development which raises doubts on its avowed principle of non-interference. It is noteworthy to mention the support and willingness of African leaders and governments towards Chinese policies, and its rising security initiatives on the continent. Arguably, Africa’s embrace of China’s increasing security engagement on the continent is part of the systemic variables that contribute to this emerging trend. Alden and Large (2015) argue in support of this assertion and have indicated that African elites have embraced China’s growing role in international affairs more than other regions of the world, first as a counter-balance to the West and more recently as a development model to be emulated. Thus, Xi Jinping’s role at the individual level, changing domestic conditions within China at the state level, calling for greater participation of Beijing in international affairs and ‘seeming’ conducive international environment at the systemic level fits into neoclassical realists’ arguments in explaining China’s rising security interests in Africa.

**Conclusion**

This paper has analysed theories that attempt to explain China’s foreign policy towards Africa and it concludes that no single theory is adequate to explain the whole period of interaction. The eclectic approach of the paper segmented Chinese foreign policy into three
main dimensions, each characterised by a dominant motive intended to advance China’s interest – political, economic and security. ‘Constructivism’ best explained China’s political ties with Africa after 1949, but Liberalism best explained its economic engagement across the period, and neoclassical Realism was most suitable in elucidating its increasing security engagement on the continent in more recent times.

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